Joe Plummer

Writing 105

9/29/10

Stepping up to the Challenge

The image “Gloves for Two” is a powerful statement about self-confidence and the ability to be comfortable in ones own skin. In the image produced by Chun-Shan Yi in the book *Human Being: Disability in Contemporary Art*, she shows herself painting with her gloves that allow her to do her artistic work even though she has stumps for hands and feet. Through this image a person can see the full extent of Chun-Shan Yi’s disability, and at first glace a viewer might be overwhelmed by a confusing array of emotions. As a viewer gets to look deeper at the image he or she will really get the opportunity to discover true beauty through beholding the characteristics displayed.

To put your body in the position to be observed by all is a courageous act made by any person. In Chun-Shan Yi’s case she is purposefully depicting her body, disabled from birth, to make a statement. She is placing herself in the public eye in order to provide people with a better understanding of her disability, and to really learn about her as an artist. Chun-Shan acknowledges that it has been hard for her as a disabled artist to get past the feeling of separation from the artistic world. She is often recognized as a “disabled artist” rather than just an “artist”. Not only is this feeling of separation placed on her, but it also carries over in judgment of her artistic works. The statement being made in Chun-Shan’s image is to really look at her, understand her, and see her for what she really is: a human being.

The way that this image is set up further emphasizes this idea that the public should really look at Chun-Shan to really see her. In the image Chun-Shan is depicted beautifully, in a very calm and artistic mode, as if she could be at work on a piece. Immediately when a person looks at the image their eyes jump right to her. She is placed in a completely black background while wearing a white dress and her colorful gloves. The contrast of colors leads the viewer. It allows them to stay focused on Chun-Shan and have the opportunity to look deeper into the meaning of the image. At an even more detailed level, in the very center of the frame the viewer will find Chun-Shan’s disabled hands and feet, further leading the viewer to the statement being made. Everything about this picture dares the public as viewers to stare disability in the eye and face up to it.

All of this is part of a theory of visual activism produced by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Chun-Shan Yi is commanding the attention of the viewer, and the viewer is faced with the choice to relate this back to them and learn, or to fail to be visually active and ignore the meaning behind the image (Garland-Thomson 205). So, in the image “Gloves for Two” there is a challenge being made, and the question is whether or not the viewer will respond to that challenge. The typical response to Chu-Shan’s image may be to overlook the image and move on, but the Garland-Thomson would see the image for its true beauty. By looking we can discover new beauty in almost anything, and visual activism is a practice that should be incorporated into everyday life in order to grow as a person.

My immediate reaction to the image was an overwhelming feeling of curiosity. I saw a calm girl at work doing the best she could to be an artist despite a huge disability deterring her from her work. Later, I was able to come to a more meaningful understanding of the image through the theory of visual activism (Garland-Thomson 205). After learning about Chun-Shan and her past I was able to look past my initial reaction and really see the strength that she possesses as an artist and as a person. I no longer see a disabled artist trying to do her best to overcome her disabled hands, but a capable artist trying to do her best work to make a difference.

Through gaining a deeper understanding of Chun-Shan Yi, a person can really learn a lot about “looking”, specifically in the case of disabled people. By truly realizing Chun-Shan’s message to look at her as a human being, the viewer will gain the ability look past what is on the surface. Ideally that viewer will apply this lesson to any person whether the person is disabled or considered abnormal. Every person has a right to be treated as a human being and nothing less.

Chun-Shan Yi’s image of herself is one of great purpose and meaning. By igniting the viewer’s curiosity Chun-Shan hopes to have people really look deeper into her story and the purpose of this image. Anyone who understands Chun-Shan’s story can see the struggles depicted in “Gloves for Two”. The message that Chun-Shan Yi is presenting is very straightforward. She is asking people to treat her, and any other person, as a human being. Chun-Shan leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether he or she will overlook the message and turn away from it, or to step up to the challenge and appreciate the image for its underlying beauty.